

# Spheres of Influence

## Clinton's Climate Change Action Plan

Global warming is a major environmental concern. Created mostly by the emission of carbon dioxide, but also of methane, nitrous oxides, and hydrofluorocarbons, many scientists believe the situation has already caused the earth's temperature to rise by about 1°F in the last 100 years. Scientists predict if it continues unchecked, global warming will continue to raise the earth's temperature, which could eventually spawn a host of environmental problems such as heightened sea levels, flooded coastal areas, damaged ecosystems, and decreased agricultural production.

On 19 October 1993, President Clinton released a plan to help curb global warming. The 49-page "Climate Change Action Plan" is an ambitious initiative designed to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions to their 1990 levels by the year 2000. It details where the administration thinks problems currently lie, and in 44 action steps, notes what industry and the government can do about the problems.

The plan relies on volunteerism by industry, one of the main points of debate. It calls for \$1.9 billion in federal spending and seeks \$60 billion more of voluntary participation by business and industry. It emphasizes partnerships between the government and industry and outlines specific plans and possibilities for those associations.

The action plan is closely intertwined with international efforts to reduce greenhouse gases. It was created in partial response to the negotiation of a climate-change treaty at the Earth Summit, held in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992. While countries aren't bound by the treaty to lower their emissions to a certain level, the treaty requires all developed countries to prepare national action plans showing how they'll reduce their growth of emissions. The Clinton plan will provide the basis for the United States' progress report at the first meeting in March 1995 of the Conference of the Parties, the body set up to oversee implementation and possible strengthening of the treaty.

The 44 action items in the Clinton plan call for reducing harmful emissions in the following areas: commercial, industrial, residential, transportation, energy supply, methane, hydrofluorocarbons, perfluorocarbons, nitrous oxide, and forestry. The plan describes the general purpose behind the action items, as well as strategies for implementing them, their market impact,

and expected emission reductions. The items range from general, such as reducing pesticides, to specific, such as reforming the federal tax subsidy for employer-provided parking.

The plan emphasizes flexibility and cooperation, noting it will "continue to break new ground in the relationship between government and the private sector—fostering cooperative approaches and a forward-looking agenda, rather than relying exclusively on command-and-control mandates that tend to lock technologies into place and stifle innovation."

The plan does not camouflage its intention to attend as much to the economy as to the environment. In the opening paragraph of the plan, Clinton states that reducing the gases to their 1990 level "is an ambitious but achievable goal that can be attained while enhancing prospects for economic growth and job creation, and positioning our country to win in the global market." He proposes to do this by stimulating investments in technologies designed to reduce greenhouse emissions; creating new environment-friendly jobs; and fostering partnerships with businesses "where focused government guidance and flexible approaches can produce cost-effective emission reductions."

In addition to 44 action items, the plan establishes three partnerships: the Climate Challenge, the Climate Wise, and the Motor Challenge. The Climate Challenge is a partnership between the Department of Energy and major electric utilities that have agreed to reduce their greenhouse emissions. Climate Wise is a joint effort among DOE, EPA, and industries that have pledged to set strict emission targets they can meet in a cost-effective way. The Motor Challenge combines the forces of DOE, motor-system manufacturers, industrial motor users, and utilities to install energy-efficient motor systems in industrial applications.

According to the plan, all three programs are underway. Eighty investor-owned utilities and hundreds of publicly owned utilities, for instance, have expressed interest in the Climate Challenge since the inception of the action plan. Since December, representatives of DOE, electric-utility trade associations, and individual utilities have been meeting in Washington to develop a voluntary program, according to Mary Kenkel, director of media relations at Edison Electric

Institute, a consortium of public and private utilities working on the Climate Challenge.

Reactions to the Clinton plan are mixed, ranging from many environmentalists' opinions that it should mandate emission controls to the energy industry's belief that the United States is already making bigger strides than other countries and shouldn't have to push harder. Some scientists think the plan can't begin to make a dent in a formidable environmental problem but concede that the political and economic issues surrounding the problem are so charged that the plan may be the only practical solution at present. The Climate Change Action Plan "at least begins to recognize this as an issue," says Jerry Mahlman, director of Princeton University's Geophysical and Fluid Dynamics Laboratory, "but it does not in any credible way provide a solution to solving it. The physics of the greenhouse-gases is extremely robust." He continued, "The only question is how much it's going to warm, where, and how soon." If world leaders want to ensure that carbon dioxide and other harmful gas emissions aren't going to cause major damage in upcoming decades, scientists estimate we would have to cut down the use of fossil fuels by 60–95%, according to Mahlman.

Alden Meyer, legislative director of the Union of Concerned Scientists, agreed that the plan falls far short of what's needed to respond to the long-term threat of global climate change. "Even if it succeeds in returning emissions to 1990 levels, the plan fails to meet the president's goal of continuing the trend of reduced emissions," Meyer said. "In fact, the administration predicts that soon after 2000, greenhouse-gas emissions will start to grow again, increasing by . . . almost as much as the plan aims to reduce emissions over the next six years."

William Reilly, former EPA director under President Bush and now a Payne visiting professor at Stanford University's Institute of International Studies, said he thinks the plan "is constructive, is serious, and deserves a chance." Reilly likened Clinton's plan to his own "3350" initiative, in which he invited 500 companies that were major emitters of high-level toxins to reduce their emissions by 50% by 1995. Since that plan was announced in 1990, it has resulted in a 33% reduction in high-level toxins, and many companies have cut emissions well beyond the plan's proposal, Reilly said. While there were no



greenhouse gases in that group, the principle holds that you can get a significant reduction through voluntary participation, he said. "If the president makes clear he has faith in industries without regulation, it creates an incentive for them to succeed, so he'll succeed." For a volunteer program to work, "it needs to have specific goals, milestones, and deadlines," which Reilly thinks the Clinton plan has.

Environmental groups and officials representing industry differed sharply in their feelings about the volunteer nature of the plan. "The plan relies on voluntary measures by the very polluters who are creating the problem," said Daniel Becker, director of the Sierra Club's Global Warming and Energy Program. "It's asking these groups to voluntarily step forward and solve the global-warming problem, and it's not surprising some of them claim they will do so." Meyer added, "Since the results depend so heavily on the extent to which these voluntary steps are carried out, the plan's ability to achieve the stated reductions is uncertain, even assuming that all the measures are vigorously implemented and fully funded—by no means a sure thing."

But businesses, including environmentally conscious ones, like the plan's emphasis on volunteerism. "The administration took the right step by initially taking a voluntary approach to solving these problems," said John Hemphill, executive director of the Business Council for a Sustainable Energy Future, a consortium of 35 environmental and natural-gas companies and associations.

"The action plan showed us a great amount of flexibility," said the Edison Institute's Kenkel. "We just worked on complying with President Bush's Clean Air Act, and there's not a tremendous amount of flexibility in that," she said. "Our argument throughout [debates on the act] was, the more flexibility you give us, the less costly it will be in the long run." The Clinton plan does afford that flexibility, Kenkel said.

John Shlaes, executive director of the Global Climate Coalition, a group of oil, coal, and other major energy-consumption industries, says he thinks the plan has the right idea in asking companies to volunteer to cut emissions, but he also thinks each company is going to have to make its own decisions about how far to go. Shlaes argues that the United States is so far ahead of most of the world in its rate of greenhouse-gas reductions that it shouldn't have to jeopardize its own economy while developing countries try to catch up economically. "U.S. emissions have been going down at a rate of 50 percent over a 15-year period ending in 1990," he said. In

the meantime, a UN panel estimates that "68 percent of the emissions will come from lesser developed countries by the year 2025," according to Shlaes.

The United States also has stricter environmental standards and regulations than many European nations, and so it shouldn't continually knock itself out to do better," Shlaes added. "We spend \$100 billion each year on the environment and about 1.7 percent of our gross domestic product, compared to Europe's 1.2 percent," he said. "We have to look at how the plan affects the U.S. economy, job loss, and job creation, and how it affects us competitively in the international arena," he added. "As long as it's cost-effective, we can take these measures," but if not, industries should be able to say no, he believes.

All groups believe some important concerns were left out of the plan. "The plan ducks the major steps needed to break America's addiction to fossil fuels—like ending taxpayer subsidies for fossil-fuel production and aggressively raising federal fuel-economy standards," Meyer said.

The single biggest step the plan could have taken and didn't, said Becker, was to require that cars get 45 miles to the gallon. The average car emits 50 tons of carbon dioxide over a lifetime; a car getting 45 miles to the gallon would reduce that figure to 23 tons, Becker said. The switch would cost the consumer about \$700 extra dollars per vehicle, but, according to Becker, "You'd recover your \$700 at the gas pump over the first few years. It's a win-win situation."

Although the plan calls for creating a task force to study the issue of automobile emissions and creating a more environmentally friendly automobile, "there is no promise as to what the outcome of that task force will be," Becker added. Hemphill agreed that the plan could have pushed transportation-related solutions more strongly. "There's a lot more that can be done, such as the deployment of alternate vehicles like natural-gas vehicles and electric vehicles," he said.

Reilly said he would have liked to see "the tax burden redistributed somewhat" so that big businesses bear a larger share of the tax burden and perhaps a BTU tax. But he said he realized Clinton tried for those measures and faced an impossible political battle. "I can't fault him for not addressing those points in his plan," he said.

For some, the plan represents a catalyst for creative thinking. Hemphill said he thinks the plan's suggestions represent "the right thing to do, but we also see some tremendous market opportunities." For example, while Hemphill applauded the plan's initiative calling for using natural gas

in the summertime to reduce nitrous oxides emissions, he believes his consortium could go a step further and look at other forms of generating even less-polluting energy, such as wind and solar power. With renewable energy sources, "there's a high initial cost, primarily because of the lack of a market," Hemphill said. But once those technologies are up and running, he sees tremendous opportunities for reducing costs there as well as helping the environment.

Members of industry, environmental groups, and the government agreed that if the plan doesn't succeed in its goals, other methods should be tried. "Clearly, if a voluntary approach doesn't work, stronger measures might need to be taken," Hemphill said. Overall, the environmental and economic stakes surrounding global warming are so high, the situation creates a catch-22 for anyone trying to tackle it, Mahlman said. Deciding on the relative importance of the two goals "is like a debating team deciding the fate of China," he said. "I know enough to know this is a very, very serious issue," Mahlman added. "But I also know enough to know the trade-off is very, very serious." In any event, he adds, "global warming is coming anyway."

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